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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

“A leader and commander to the people.”—*Isaiah 55:4.*

I know of no words that more fitly describe, in a general way, our great war President, than do these words of the Old Testament. Abraham Lincoln was preeminently a leader. He was a born commander, and he was a “leader and commander to the people.” Not to the people of any one section or party merely—not to the people of the North or South, of the East or West—but to the people of this whole nation, over which, in the providence of God, he was appointed to rule. It is said that at the moment of Lincoln’s death, Stanton uttered this eulogy: “There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen.”

The life of Abraham Lincoln reads more like a romance of fiction than a tale of reality. The elements which enter into his biography are of the simplest, plainest, homeliest, most common-place nature imaginable; and yet as we look back upon them in the light of history, there is somehow about them a singular fascination. They are, as it were, transfigured before us. They are clothed in a glory and beauty which mere art were powerless either to create or to portray. Born in obscurity and poverty, sharing the hardships and privations of pioneer life in the South and West during his childhood and youth and early manhood, then through the successive occupations of rail-splitter, grocery clerk, postmaster, surveyor, lawyer, politician and statesman, slowly but surely climbing the ladder of success until at last he stood on its topmost round as President of the United States—from which, in the very moment of his fame and triumph, he was translated by martyrdom into the great company of earth’s immortals—I know of no other life in human history (save that of Jesus himself) so

alluring, so helpful, so uplifting, so encouraging, so inspiring to men, as the life of Lincoln.

Wherein, let us ask ourselves, lies the secret of the strange hold which Lincoln has upon our day and generation, one hundred years after his birth and nearly half a century since the date of his death? What gives him his secure place in the memory and affections of the American people? What is the key to the ever-growing influence which he exerts upon our modern civilization and our twentieth-century institutions? Why is it that being dead he yet speaks? What is the vital quality of such a life as his which not only shapes the course of history in its own time but which moulds the events of ages? What, in a word, constitutes the greatness and renown of Lincoln which makes his name a familiar household word the world around, and crowns it with the tributes of men's praise?

To begin with, it is not wealth. If it were true—as it is not true—that the American people of the present day worship at the shrine of the great god Mammon, then the life of Lincoln would have but little claim upon our attention. If it were true that the aim and ambition and end of life were money-getting, then the successful career of a Russell Sage or a John D. Rockefeller would be of more absorbing interest to our American youth than the story of Lincoln the boy who slept on a bed of leaves; or of Lincoln the lawyer whose conscientious scruples would not permit him to charge exorbitant fees for his services; or of Lincoln the most prominent statesman of his time who, throughout his public career, lived simply and unostentatiously, and died a comparatively poor man. No, the life of Abraham Lincoln is a standing rebuke to the false and pernicious doctrine of materialism, that wealth spells success. "Wealth," he once said himself, "is simply a superfluity of things we don't need."

It is not aristocratic birth, or illustrious lineage, or social prestige that accounts for the greatness of Lincoln. There was no royal blood in his veins. He was too proud to care from whence he came. "I don't know who my grandfather was,"

he said, "and am much more concerned to know what his grandson will be."

Nor had Lincoln any of the exterior graces of personal beauty and polished manners to recommend him. Raw-boned, awkward, ugly in form and features, he was one of the homeliest of men. He was called "that tall, crooked man," "the long-armed creature from Illinois." It is said that a wood cut of him in the New York Tribune, the day after his nomination, lost him twenty-five votes in one township. His appearance is described as that "of a rustic on his first visit to the circus." Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, speaking of Dr. Holmes's ideal of a President of the United States, that he should be conventionally a gentleman, "suited to walk directly as he was, into any court of the world and not astonish anybody," says that tried by that standard. President Lincoln would not have fulfilled the conception.

Nor can you account for Lincoln's success on the ground of mere luck. Like all success in this world it was "the legitimate result of adequate causes."

It is only as we go back of all the adventitious circumstances which I have named, that we discover the real explanation of Lincoln's greatness. Its source was not from without, but from within the man. It lay in the strength of his intellectual and moral and spiritual qualities. Lincoln stands for supremacy of character in the struggle of life; for man's superiority to his environment; for the triumph of truth and righteousness over the powers of darkness and evil. Lowell rightly calls Lincoln "our first great American." He preeminently typifies the ideas of a great Republic. He represents ideal democracy. He is the very embodiment of the fundamental principles of our American institutions. He is more thoroughly American in this respect than Washington even. Between Washington and Lincoln there is a likeness and a difference. They were both self-taught, both surveyors, both rose by their own abilities to positions of the highest usefulness and honor; both became Presidents of the United States, and both were great and good men. But Washington was an aristocrat, a patrician. He was born

of a Virginia family in easy circumstances. His boyhood was one of pleasure rather than of hardship; and later he himself became a typical southern planter, and a large slaveholder. Lincoln, on the other hand, was a plebeian of the plebeians; of the lowliest and most obscure origin; inured to toil and hardship from the first; a representative of the laboring classes; a man of the common people. He was a life-long champion of the poor, the friendless, the down-trodden and the oppressed. Hating with every drop of his blood the iniquitous system of slavery, he stood for the American conception of the equal rights of man—that is, of giving to every man, as far as possible, an equal chance in life.

It is this intensely human quality in Lincoln which appeals to men, which draws them to him, which inspires them with reverence and affection for his memory. The more human we are, the greater and nobler we must perforce become; for it is the human element in man which is akin to the divine element in God. And Lincoln was the great humanitarian. He is our foremost American citizen. He stands upon his lofty pedestal of fame not by the favor of fortune, but through the virtue of achievement. He is a splendid example—not only to America but to the world—of the imperishable success, though it be crowned with martyrdom, which waits on godlike character.

We must not speak of character, however, in too general a way. We must not think of it as some vague, abstract, mysterious quality of human nature. It is capable of being analyzed into its component parts, and so studied for our instruction and benefit. What were some of the more conspicuous traits then, let us go on to inquire, of Abraham Lincoln's character.

1. I name, in the first place, his *honesty*. That has become proverbial. Honesty with Lincoln was not mere prudential policy, it was a sacred principle. He was more than honest, he was the very soul of honor. He was true to himself, to his own conscience, to the best and noblest instincts of his nature. Honesty is the golden thread that is interwoven with the very

fabric of his manhood and shines throughout his whole career, from beginning to end.

We see it in his business dealings. It is Lincoln the grocery clerk who returns the money which he has received by mistake, and walks a mile to correct a slight error which he has made in weighing a half-pound of tea for one of his customers. It is Lincoln who, later on, becoming involved in a business failure, refuses to take advantage of the law of bankruptcy and settles his partner's debts—though it takes years of the closest economy to do so—because a promise is a moral obligation from which no legal excuse can absolve a man.

Again, the honesty of Lincoln's character is revealed conspicuously in his profession as a lawyer. He held honor to be the essential quality of that profession. He believed that "those things which detract from the character of the man detract from the character of the lawyer." "If, in your judgment, you cannot be an honest lawyer," was his advice to young men, "resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation rather than one in the choosing of which you do, in advance, consent to be a knave." "Discourage litigation," was his advice to lawyers themselves. "Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is often the real loser—in fees, expenses and waste of time. As a peacemaker the lawyer has a superior opportunity of becoming a good man. There will always be enough business. Never stir up litigation. A worse man can scarcely be found than one who does this. Who can be more nearly a fiend than he who habitually overhauls the register of deeds in search of defects in titles, whereon to stir up strife and put money in his pocket? A moral tone ought to be infused into the profession which should drive such men out of it."

Lincoln practised what he preached. He lived up to the highest ideals of his profession. It is said that he was only formidable in court when he believed thoroughly in "the justice of his cause," and that he would abandon a client if he found he was defending a guilty man. But, with the truth on his side, no man could appeal to a jury more convincingly than he.

After the famous murder trial in which Lincoln freed Armstrong by bringing an almanac into the courtroom and proving thereby that there was no moon on the night in which the murder was committed, contrary to the testimony of one of the important witnesses in the case—the story arose that Lincoln fooled the jury by having an almanac printed for that special purpose. Nothing could be farther from the truth, or a greater libel upon Lincoln's integrity. He was absolutely incapable of such deception. To him dissimulation was an unknown art. His armor was his honest thought, and simple truth his highest skill.

It is during his political career, perhaps—under those conditions in which the practice of absolute honesty is usually considered most difficult—that we most admire it in Lincoln. In a speech delivered in the legislature at Springfield, Illinois, on a measure of which he did not approve, he uttered these brave words: "You may burn my body to ashes, and scatter them to the winds of heaven; you may drag my soul down to the regions of darkness and despair to be tormented forever; but you will never get me to support a measure which I believe to be wrong, although by doing so I may accomplish that which I believe to be right."

In the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln eventually vanquished his opponent and gained the Presidency, not through superior force of intellect and eloquence alone, but through his ability to find the sophistries in Douglas's arguments and thrust them through and through with the naked sword of truth.

So during his whole career as President of the United States—amid all the trials and temptations of those troublous times—Lincoln was absolutely and uncompromisingly true to the dictates of his own conscience. "I desire," he said, "to so conduct the affairs of this administration that if, at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me."

Honest Abraham Lincoln!

2. I name as the second great trait of Lincoln's character,

which it will be profitable for us to consider, his rare good judgment and common-sense, springing from his wide knowledge of human nature and his large mental grasp of public affairs.

Uneducated, in the conventional sense of the term, Lincoln, by his own efforts, acquired what few so-called educated people possess—the *ability to think*. He had the rare faculty of reducing the most perplexing legal and moral questions to their simplest terms. By keeping these, in the form of propositions, constantly before his mind, he never lost sight of the real issue. He used to say that “Euclid, well studied, would free the world of half its calamities.” The object of education, with Lincoln, was to reason clearly and to express himself clearly; and the practical results of this mental discipline appear in the convincing logic of his political debates, in the charming literary style of his state papers, and in his solution of the slavery question and salvation of the Union. It is said that he “read less and thought more than any man of his standing in America, if not in the world.” Herein lay one of the chief sources of his greatness. He was self-reliant. He trusted himself. Like all great men, he was chary of his friendships. We are told that he never had more than two or three intimate friends whom he admitted to his confidence. It is true he sought advice from many sources—skillfully drawing out the opinions of men of all shades of belief in his conversations with them—but in the end he acted independently. Like all great leaders, also, he was an opportunist. He knew the value of public opinion, and studied it, and shaped his course in accordance with it. He realized that without its sanction no law can be enforced; and, as in the case of the Emancipation Proclamation, he did not act until the time was fully ripe. Issued sooner, in all probability, that proclamation would have failed.

Lincoln had what has been called the distinguishing characteristic of a great statesman, namely, the ability to see the whole of a problem instead of a part of it merely. As a lawyer, he could state the opposite side of a case as clearly as his own side. His fairness to his opponents, in this respect, was remarkable, and contributed greatly to his success. So, as

President of the United States, he viewed the public questions of his day in every possible light. Herein lay the secret of his skill in dealing with the slavery issue. In the entire history of this country there has never been a more intricate and difficult problem confronting it than this, and the patience and wisdom and tact and prudence of Lincoln in meeting it were wonderful. Beset by conflicting views on every hand—opposed not only by the deep-rooted traditions of the Southern slave-holding states, but harrassed by pro-slavery sentiments in the North as well; listening today to the arguments of the abolitionists, and tomorrow to the “exponents of peace-at-any-price;” with men high in the counsels of the nation seeking to influence him in different ways; with Phillips and Garrison distrustful of him, with Greely denouncing him and the members of his own cabinet at variance with him—to me it is one of the most remarkable instances of the guidance of a Divine Providence in the history of nations, that Lincoln made no mistake in dealing with the slavery question.

That question, however, we must remember, was not uppermost in Lincoln’s patriotic mind. His one idea was the preservation of the Union. The fortunes of the institution of slavery were contingent on that paramount issue. He would save the Union, whether with slavery or without it. But the time came when he realized “that slavery must die that the nation might live;” when he saw clearly that as a house divided against itself cannot stand, so this nation could not endure “half-slave and half-free.” Then the Emancipation Proclamation—the greatest document since the Declaration of Independence, and the *demonstration of the assertion*, as it has been called, that all men are created free—was written. No wonder that when Lincoln signed it his hand trembled! “As affairs have turned,” he afterwards said with reference to it, “it is the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.”

Thus this great, wise, cautious, level-headed, far-seeing man,—as Theodore Tilton said of him: “Bound the nation and unbound the slave.”

3. In our enumeration of Lincoln's virtues we must not overlook another fundamental quality of his greatness, namely, his *charity*, his *magnanimity*. It is said that the key-note of his character may be found in his own oft-quoted words in the concluding sentence of the second inaugural address: "With malice towards none, with charity for all." "Charity," says the great apostle, "suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." Surely if these words might be written of any one man, they might most appropriately be used to describe the character of Abraham Lincoln. Absolutely free from the spirit of resentment, humble, seeking the good of others rather than his own advancement, self-controlled, seeing the virtues rather than the vices of men, consecrated to truth, long-suffering, patient, hopeful, forbearing—Lincoln was the very embodiment of this thirteenth chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. The kindness of his nature was especially disclosed in the generous, forgiving disposition which he manifested toward his enemies. In the exercise of the pardoning power, indeed, this was carried to such an extent that some regarded it as an element of weakness rather than of strength in his character. "Well, I don't believe *shooting* will do him any good," he would say of some poor soldier who had been condemned to die and whose case had been recommended to his clemency. "Give me that pen,"—and he would sign a paper granting his pardon. Lincoln's failings, in this respect, leaned to virtue's side. He was the friend of the erring and the friendless. He put himself in their place, and entered into their experiences and troubles. "I never felt sure," he said, speaking of deserters from the army, "but I might drop my gun and run away if I found myself in line of battle." The soldiers—whether on the field or in the camps and prisons and hospitals—never had a firmer, more faithful, warmer, personal friend than "Father Abraham," as he was reverently and affectionately called.

4. It seems almost superfluous in this pulpit, after all that I have said, to ask the question if Lincoln was a *religious* man ; but I should not appropriately conclude my sermon did I not pause for a moment to emphasize as the finest and highest quality of Lincoln's noble and heroic nature, his belief in and reliance upon a Supreme Power in the universe, regulating and controlling the affairs of men. In evidence of this we have only to turn to the speech which he made to his neighbors and friends on leaving his home in Springfield, Illinois, for Washington to assume the duties of the Presidency. On that occasion he said : " A duty devolves upon me which is, perhaps, greater than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. I feel that I cannot succeed without the same Divine aid which sustained him, and on the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support, and I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain." And after slavery had been overthrown, and the long, bloody conflict was ended, and the Union was saved—when that success for which he prayed and toiled had indeed come at last—" You must not give me the praise," he said humbly, " it belongs to God."

That was Lincoln's religion. Now just a word more concerning his religious belief. Lincoln belonged to no church, though he was a regular attendant of the Presbyterian church of Springfield, Illinois, of which his wife, I think, was a member. "*Lincoln's religion was a creedless Christianity.*" It was the religion of Unitarianism. " I have never united myself to any church," he once said in conversation with a friend, " because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrines which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar, as the sole qualification for membership, the Saviour's condensed statement of the substance of both Law and Gospel, ' Thou

shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul."

"Such was he, our Martyr-Chief,

* * * * *

Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.

* * * * *

One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,

Not lured by any cheat of birth,

But by his clear-grained human worth,

And brave old wisdom of sincerity!

* * * * *

The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,

Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,

New birth of our new soil, the first American."

APR 27 1909







